

# FOCUS ON THE FIGURE: TWENTY YEARS

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART APRIL 15-JUNE 13, 1982



Eric Fischl, Critics, 1979



Alex Katz, Paul Taylor, 1959

The tradition of figurative art has endured since cave painting. It has taken different forms and been put to different uses over the years, some more conservative, some more revolutionary than others. But in each generation there have been artists who have found the figure a worthy subject to reinterpret in fresh and personal ways. The purpose of this exhibition is to examine some of the different approaches figurative artists have taken over the past twenty years. The timing seems particularly appropriate since the last five years have seen the emergence of a new group of artists who are once again redefining what a figure can mean in painting.

A marked change has occurred in art in the past decade. In the mid-1970s young artists began to challenge the formalist conventions of the preceding generation by introducing raucous color, decorative surfaces, and recognizable imagery into their work--elements which were virtually anathema to the Minimalist sensibility. By the late seventies the change seemed complete. Emotive handling took precedence over impersonal fabrication; intuition replaced logic; eccentric configurations replaced reductivist structures. Feeling and content became paramount for the first time since Abstract Expressionism--the pendulum of art had swung from classicism to romanticism.

These attitudes took various expressive forms, but the one which seems most definitively to have captured the public's attention is figuration. Articles on the new figurative expressionism abound; galleries

and alternative spaces are increasingly scheduling figurative presentations of one sort or another; and even heretofore abstract artists are introducing more explicit figurative references into their work. This does not mean that little interesting abstract painting is being produced; rather, that the young artists who currently command the most attention are using the figure. And the existence of a comparable, autonomous trend in Europe gives the American phenomenon a broad context, as part of an international development.

Despite critical pronouncements about the reemergence of figure painting, the irony is that it never lost currency. The early sixties witnessed a similar heralding of a figurative revival. (At that point, figuration was moving in two directions: New Realism, based on direct observation; and Pop Art, developed from the images and techniques of mass media.) Some of the reasons why these earlier artists rejected abstraction and returned to recognizable imagery are shared by today's figurative painters. The dominant aesthetic--in the early sixties, Abstract Expressionism; in the mid-seventies, Minimalism--had become too familiar and had lost its driving force. A mannerist superficiality overcame these movements which seemed to deplete art pictorially and emotionally.

For the older figurative painters, who reacted against Abstract Expressionism, the initial flurry of excitement that greeted their work soon abated and critical literature continued to concentrate narrowly on formalist innovations, promoting abstract art as the culmination of American artistic achievement and relegating figurative work to an almost pariah-like status. To the arbiters of culture, figurative painting seemed regressive, and less incisive than abstraction in addressing the paramount aesthetic issues--so much so that Philip Leider, as editor of *Artforum*, could safely claim that the work of Jack Beal, Philip Pearlstein and Alex Katz was irrelevant to the fundamental concerns of the day. Only Pop artists like Andy Warhol or Roy Lichtenstein, whose work could be absorbed within the prevailing aesthetic of emblematic, single-image forms, won approval. But despite the second-class citizenship bestowed on figurative painting, it persisted. Even though critically unfashionable, throughout the sixties and seventies major talents successfully employed the figure to express their pictorial ideas.

I TRIED TO  
REASON IT  
OUT / I TRIED  
TO SEE  
THINGS FROM  
MOM AND  
DAD'S VIEW-  
POINT / I  
TRIED NOT TO  
THINK OF  
EDDIE, SO  
MY MIND  
WOULD BE  
CLEAR AND  
COMMON  
SENSE  
COULD  
TAKE  
OVER / BUT  
EDDIE  
KEPT  
COMING  
BACK...



Roy Lichtenstein, Eddie Diptych, 1962



William Beckman,  
Double Nude  
(Diana and William  
Beckman), 1978



Ed Paschke, Violencia, 1980

What distinguishes the figurative artists of the 1980s from the earlier generation is that their work is perceived as being in the forefront of stylistic reevaluation, and of contemporary cultural change as well; it seems to represent, as Hilton Kramer wrote, "a barometer of changes greater than itself." In this sense current figurative art can be compared to post-modernist architecture, political neo-conservatism, and the increased sense of tradition in American life.

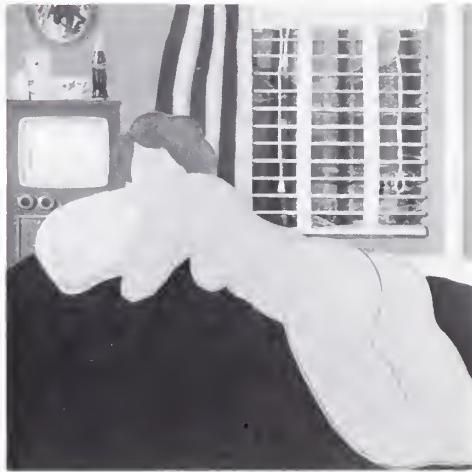
What has changed to place figurative art today in the vanguard of style? Why is figuration at this moment attracting such a large number of significant partisans and practitioners? On a purely aesthetic level, the work of today's generation of figurative artists can be understood simply as the most obvious aspect of a general retreat from the ideological purism and reductivist vocabulary that have dominated art for the past two decades. Although the particular motivations are diverse, it is possible to see the rejection of abstraction as a kind of stylistic exhaustion. To many younger artists, schooled in formalist strategies, abstraction was bankrupt--its "juice has gone out," as David Salle has remarked. Saying anything fresh with abstraction had been undermined by the accumulated choices and legacies of prior artists. Figuration gave younger artists room to work outside of what had become a pictorially restricted and already academic tradition. At the same time, representational imagery afforded them a means to introduce personal content and emotional resonance into their work--two primary goals of the new art.

It should be acknowledged that there are critics of the new figuration who claim its success is merely a function of the marketplace; that the tyranny of fashion, which necessitates a markedly different style each season, is primarily responsible for the current figurative phenomenon. What is more demonstrable is that the size of the art audience has increased dramatically. The appreciation of art is no longer a pastime for the elite. In this sense, figuration may be seen as a democratizing endeavor, a populist effort to make art accessible to an enlarged audience.

At first sight, the new figurative art seems akin to that produced by the previous generation. Among both groups of artists are those who exploit the figure for narrative content; or who use it non-associatively, as no more important than



Robert Kushner, French Tart, 1978



Tom Wesselmann,  
Great American  
Nude #39, 1962



Philip Pearlstein, Female Model in Kimono, Male Model on Chief's Blanket, 1981

any other form in the picture; who truncate or fragment the body; or who create an emotionalism through gestural paint handling or expressionistic intertwining of figure groups. But there are significant ways in which the two generations diverge. Figurative art in the 1980s eschews conventional notions of beauty and decorum in order to heighten impact and ensure emotional force. Little in this art is restrained or austere. What prevails instead is a surfeit of baroque opulence and complexity--of paint, images, and emotion. The deliberately clumsy, almost naive, drawing style one finds in much of today's art testifies to a drive for directness and spontaneity. These are qualities not unique to the present, as this exhibition patently attests, but their current pervasiveness is significant.

Feeling and personal content are perceived by these artists as more important than formal innovation. The desire to extend art history has been replaced by an interest in earlier artistic methods and images. The adaptation by contemporary artists of prior styles of expression has forced a revision of our notion of originality. Artistic invention is no longer equated solely with formal novelty--establishing new boundaries for art--but with creating new forms out of previously established norms and historical inventories.

In addition to past styles and art-historical images, contemporary figurative artists also make use of recycled motifs. Rather than paint directly from life, many artists readily appropriate photographs, art reproductions, and mass-media images from movies, magazine illustrations, and comic books. Although Pop artists and Chicago Imagists also employed such imagery, or its mechanical techniques, their paintings seem, in retrospect, more innocent and optimistic; they sardonically comment on--but do not themselves emotionally embody--the depersonalizing aspects of mass technology. For the generation that grew up watching television, however, mass-media presentations of the experiences of life have become paradigms--increasingly authoritative models against which genuine personal emotions are measured. Far from merely replicating discredited emotional surrogates, therefore, these artists are painting what has become "reality" for contemporary society.

Anxiety and psychic isolation permeate the new figuration to a degree unknown in the art of the sixties and seventies. This



Jim Nutt,  
"I've seen this  
before," 1974



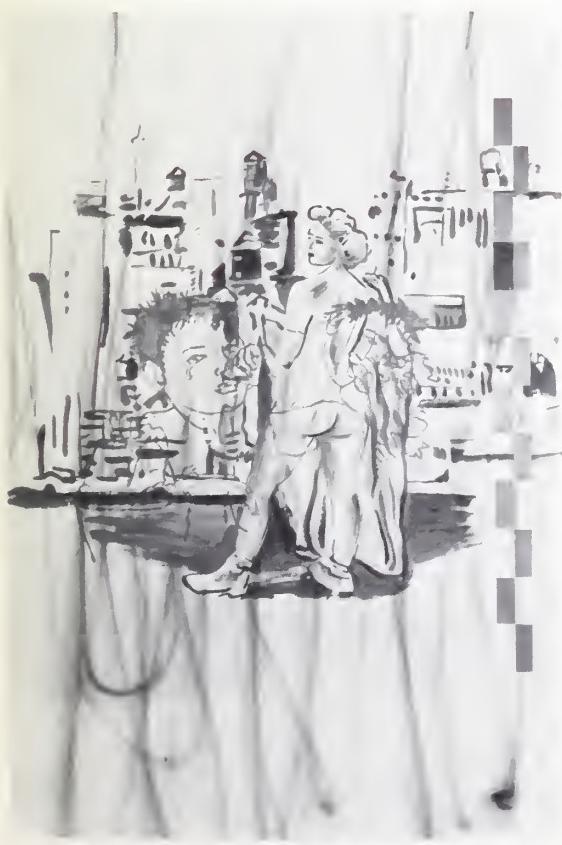
Julian Schnabel,  
St. Francis in  
Ecstasy, 1980



Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, 1963

suggests the possibility of a socio-political explanation for the resurgence of figuration. Contrary to the theories advanced at the turn of the century about the correlation between abstraction and deteriorating social conditions, the history of twentieth-century American art indicates that abstraction enjoys greater favor in times of optimism, realism in times of uncertainty and retrenchment. The search for universal truths or absolutes that underlies abstraction tends to predominate in periods of stability and confidence. In contrast, periods of national unrest and irresolution give rise to individualistic concerns--concerns which in art seem to be manifested in the ascendancy of realism. Given the disintegrating political and social fabric of the last decade, and the consequent anxiety and insecurity, it is no wonder that art for art's sake has come to seem irrelevant.

Barbara Haskell  
Curator



David Salle, Seeing Sight, 1981



Joan Brown,  
Cosmic Nurse,  
1978



Jedd Garet,  
Pink Statue, 1979



Alfred Leslie, A Birthday for Ethel Moore, 1976

# CHECKLIST

Dimensions are in inches,  
height preceding width.



Susan Rothenberg,  
Untitled Head,  
1978



Willem de Kooning, Woman in Landscape IV, 1968



Richard Bosman, The Kick, 1982



Jack Beal,  
Prudence, Avarice,  
Lust, Justice,  
Anger, 1977-78

JACK BEAL (b. 1931)  
Lives in New York

Ivan, 1963  
Oil on canvas, 37 3/4 x 32 7/8  
Collection of H. Donald Widdoes

Self-Portrait, 1963  
Oil on canvas, 35 x 27  
Allan Frumkin Gallery, New York

Prudence, Avarice, Lust, Justice,  
Anger, 1977-78  
Oil on canvas, 72 x 78  
University of Virginia Art Museum,  
Charlottesville

WILLIAM BECKMAN (b. 1942)  
Lives in Wassaic, New York

Diana III, 1976  
Oil on wood panel, 74 x 51  
Private collection

Double Nude (Diana and William Beckman), 1978  
Oil on wood panel, 64 x 59  
The Herbert W. Plimpton Foundation; on extended loan to the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts

JONATHAN BOROFSKY (b. 1942)  
Lives in Venice, California

Splithead at 2673047, 1980  
Acrylic on two shaped canvases,  
133 x 43 and 133 x 30  
Collection of Bruno Bischofberger

RICHARD BOSMAN (b. 1944)  
Lives in New York

The Red Staircase, 1981  
Oil on canvas, 84 x 66  
Private collection

The Kick, 1982  
Oil on canvas, 54 x 42  
Collection of Refco, Inc.

JOAN BROWN (b. 1938)  
Lives in San Francisco

The Journey #5, 1976  
Enamel on canvas, 90 x 72  
Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California; Purchased by the Acquisition Council with a matching NEA grant

Cosmic Nurse, 1978  
Enamel on canvas, 96 x 78  
Collection of the artist, courtesy Hansen Fuller Goldeen Gallery, San Francisco

WILLEM DE KOONING (b. 1904)  
Lives in East Hampton, New York

Woman Accabonac, 1966  
Oil on paper mounted on canvas,  
79 x 35  
Whitney Museum of American Art,  
New York; Gift of Mrs. Bernard  
F. Gimbel 68.99

Woman in Landscape IV, 1968  
Oil on canvas, 59 x 48  
Private collection

ERIC FISCHL (b. 1948)  
Lives in New York

Critics, 1979  
Oil on glassine; five sheets,  
73 x 128 overall  
Edward Thorp Gallery, New York

Bad Boy, 1981  
Oil on canvas, 66 x 96  
Collection of Arthur and Carol  
Goldberg

JEDD GARET (b. 1955)  
Lives in New York

Pink Statue, 1979  
Oil on canvas, 72 x 56  
Collection of Fred Mueller

Sea Hunt, 1981  
Acrylic on canvas, 73 x 57  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Aron B.  
Katz

GREGORY GILLESPIE (b. 1936)  
Lives in Amherst, Massachusetts

Self-Portrait (Torso), 1975  
Oil and magna on wood,  
30 1/4 x 24 3/4  
Collection of Sydney and Frances  
Lewis

Self-Portrait in Studio, 1976-77  
Oil and magna on wood, 63 x 48  
Private collection

ALEX KATZ (b. 1927)  
Lives in New York

Paul Taylor, 1959  
Oil on canvas, 66 x 73  
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

The Red Smile, 1963  
Oil on canvas, 78 3/4 x 115  
Marlborough Gallery, New York

Rudy, 1980  
Oil on aluminum, 10 x 71  
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

ROBERT KUSHNER (b. 1949)  
Lives in New York

French Tart, 1978  
Acrylic on cotton, 94 1/8 x 126 1/4  
Collection of the artist, courtesy  
Holly Solomon Gallery, New York

ALFRED LESLIE (b. 1927)  
Lives in Amherst, Massachusetts

The "Killing" Cycle--Six: "Loading  
Pier," 1975  
Oil on canvas, 108 x 72  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert  
H. Orchard

A Birthday for Ethel Moore, 1976  
Oil on canvas, 108 x 132  
Allan Frumkin Gallery, New York

ROY LICHTENSTEIN (b. 1923)  
Lives in Southampton, New York

Eddie Diptych, 1962  
Oil on canvas; two panels, 44 1/2 x 53  
overall  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Michael  
Sonnabend

Girl with Hair Ribbon, 1965  
Oil and magna on canvas, 48 x 48  
Private collection

ROBERT LONGO (b. 1953)  
Lives in New York

Men in the Cities: Outdoor Life #1,  
1981  
Charcoal and graphite on paper,  
96 x 48  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Charles  
M. Diker

Men in the Cities: Outdoor Life #2,  
1981  
Charcoal and graphite on paper,  
96 x 48  
Collection of Arthur and Carol  
Goldberg

Men in the Cities: Outdoor Life #3,  
1981  
Charcoal and graphite on paper,  
96 x 48  
Metro Pictures, New York

ALICE NEEL (b. 1900)  
Lives in New York

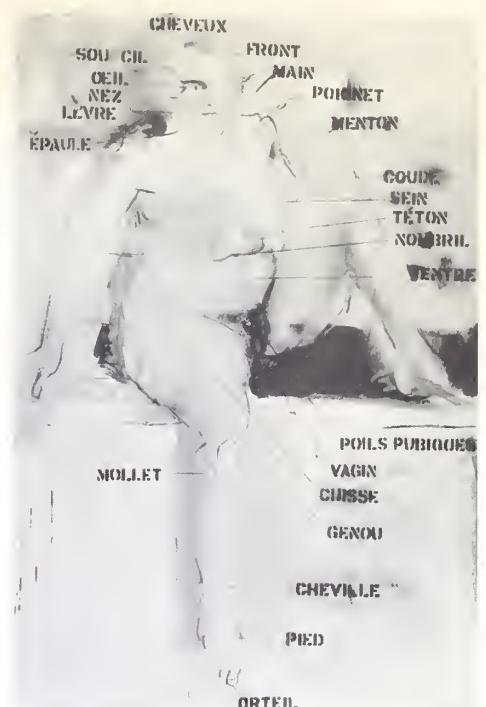
Jackie Curtis and Rita Red, 1970  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 42  
Private collection

Richard in the Era of the  
Corporation, 1979  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 45  
Graham Gallery, New York

JIM NUTT (b. 1938)  
Lives in Chicago

"I've seen this before," 1974  
Acrylic on canvas with papier-  
mâché, 59 1/2 x 49 1/2  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Lewis  
Manilow

Ah ha (it is!), 1979-80  
Oil on canvas, 24 x 22  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence  
I. Aronson



Larry Rivers, Parts of the Body:  
French Vocabulary Lesson III, 1962



Robert Longo, Men in the Cities:  
Outdoor Life #2, 1981

Jonathan Borofsky, Splithead at 2673047, 1980



**ED PASCHKE** (b. 1937)  
Lives in Chicago

Rufus, 1974  
Oil on canvas, 55 x 55  
Collection of Misha and Sonia Zaks

Violencia, 1980  
Oil on canvas, 74 x 96½  
Whitney Museum of American Art,  
New York; Promised gift of Mr.  
and Mrs. Alan E. Koppel P.2.81

**PHILIP PEARLSTEIN** (b. 1924)  
Lives in New York

Female Model on Ladder, 1976  
Oil on canvas, 72 x 96  
John and Mable Ringling Museum of  
Art, Sarasota, Florida

Female Model in Kimono, Male Model  
on Chief's Blanket, 1981  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 60  
Allan Frumkin Gallery, New York

**LARRY RIVERS** (b. 1923)  
Lives in New York

Parts of the Body: French  
Vocabulary Lesson III, 1962  
Oil on canvas, 72 x 48  
Private collection

**SUSAN ROTHENBERG** (b. 1945)  
Lives in New York

Untitled Head, 1978  
Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 77½  
HHK Foundation for Contemporary  
Art, Milwaukee

The Smoker, 1978-79  
Acrylic and flashe on canvas,  
62½ x 45  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Carl D.  
Lobell

Alice Neel, Jackie Curtis and  
Rita Red, 1970



**DAVID SALLE** (b. 1952)  
Lives in New York

Seeing Sight, 1981  
Oil, acrylic on photosensitive linen,  
70 x 46  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Charles  
M. Diker

Splinter Man, 1982  
Oil, acrylic on canvas, 98 x 196  
Courtesy Mary Boone/Leo Castelli

**JULIAN SCHNABEL** (b. 1951)  
Lives in New York

St. Francis in Ecstasy, 1980  
Oil, wood putty, and plates on  
wood panel, 96 x 84  
Collection of Mary Boone

X-Ray: The Stages of Man, 1982  
Oil on velvet, 108 x 156  
Courtesy Mary Boone/Leo Castelli

**ANDY WARHOL** (b. 1928)  
Lives in New York

Robert Rauschenberg, 1963  
Acrylic and silkscreen enamel  
on canvas, 82 x 82  
Abrams Family Collection, New York

Walking Torso, 1977  
Acrylic, oil, and silkscreen on  
canvas; two panels, 50 x 42 each  
Courtesy Frederick Hughes

**TOM WESSELMANN** (b. 1931)  
Lives in New York

Great American Nude #39, 1962  
Charcoal, acrylic, enamel, collage,  
and assemblage (including work-  
ing TV) on board, 48 x 48 x 2  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jerry D.  
Berger

Gregory Gillespie, Self-Portrait  
in Studio, 1976-77



#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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B. H.

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Design: Linda Stillman

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